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Maxim the Greek, Astrology and the Great Conjunction of 1524

ROBERT COLLIS

In the early 1520s the theologian Maxim the Greek (c. 1470–1555) wrote a series of polemical letters in Moscow in which he lambasted what he saw as the pernicious astrological and religious influence of Nicolaus Bülow (fl. 1490–1533), the German chief physician to Vasili III (1479–1533). According to Maxim, the German was a false prophet, a ‘fraudulent sophist’ and a wolf in sheep’s clothing, who was ‘acting on the evil contrivances of Balaam’.¹ The vitriolic tone adopted by Maxim reflects the degree of danger he felt regarding Bülow, the chief promoter in Muscovy of astrological predictions that foresaw a disastrous flood in 1524.

In this article I will study the anti-astrological tracts written by Maxim against the background of the great conjunction of 1524 — a celestial phenomenon that engendered an acute sense of eschatological anxiety across much of Europe in the first quarter of the sixteenth century.² I will devote much-needed attention to how the great

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¹ Maxim, the Greek (Prepodobnyi Maksim Grek), *Tvoreniia*, 3 vols, Sviato-Troitskaia Sergieva Lavra, 1996, 2, pp. 121–22, 277. In referring to Bülow as ‘a wolf in sheep’s clothing’, Maxim is drawing on Matthew 7:15, which in the King James Version reads: ‘Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.’

² Over the past century our knowledge of the furore surrounding this great conjunction in Western Europe — and principally Italy, Germany, France and Spain — has been greatly increased by the scholarly efforts of Gustav Hellmann, Lynn Thorndike, Ottavio Niccoli and Paola Zambelli. See Gustav Hellmann, ‘Beiträge zur Geschichte der Meteorologie’, *Veröffentlichungen des Königlich Preussischen Meteorologischen Instituts*, 273, 1914, pp. 5–102; Lynn Thorndike, *A History of Magic & Experimental Science*, 8 vols, New York, 1923–58, 5, pp. 178–233; Ottavio Niccoli, *Prophecy and Power in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane, Princeton, NJ, 1990; Paola Zambelli, ‘Many Ends for the World: Luca Gaurico Instigator of the Debate in Italy and Germany’, in Paola Zambelli (ed.), *Astrologi Hallucinati: Stars and the End of the World in Luther’s Time*, Berlin, 1986, pp. 239–63.

conjunction of 1524 was viewed in Muscovite Russia in the years immediately preceding the celestial event. Moreover, the polemical debate entered into by Maxim the Greek, against Bülow and his beliefs, arguably ranks as the most wide-ranging and articulate discussion of the role of astrology in Muscovite Russia.³

As I will argue, however, the scope of the debate encompassed far more than the likelihood of a deluge in 1524, as it touches on fundamental issues, such as the relationship between astrology and Orthodoxy and the place of the controversial art in determining the policies and actions of the grand prince. What is more, the astrological debate between Maxim and Bülow provides an excellent example of the extremely complex cultural and religious dynamic at play in early sixteenth-century Muscovy. In the person of Maxim alone, one is able to study the transmission of religious and philosophical ideas from Renaissance Italy and from the centre of Greek Orthodoxy at Mount Athos, accompanied with an awareness of a distinct Muscovite history and heritage.⁴

Accordingly, I will demonstrate how the astrological predictions of a disastrous flood in 1524 — championed in Muscovy by Bülow — provoked a passionate rebuttal by Maxim the Greek. It will be argued that this response drew heavily on the arguments of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–94). However, within this Italian framework Maxim used distinct colours befitting his Orthodox surroundings and heritage — namely by drawing on Eastern Church Fathers and Byzantine chroniclers.

1. *The European Context*

In 1499 the German astrologers Johannes Stöffler (1452–1531) and Jakob Pflaum (c. 1450–1500) published their *Almanach nova* in Ulm, which contained catastrophic predictions for February 1524. According

³ A number of Russian scholars over the past hundred years have discussed Maxim's relationship to astrology. See, for example, V. S. Ikonnikov, *Maksim Grek i ego vremia. Istoricheskoe issledovanie*, Kiev, 1915, pp. 260–360; B. E. Raikov, *Ocherki po istorii geliotsentricheskogo mirovozzreniia v Rossii*, Moscow and Leningrad, 1937, pp. 92–94; L. S. Kovtun, 'Planida—furtuna—schastnoe koleso (k istorii russkoi idiomatiki)', *Trudy Otdela drevnerusskoi literatury*, 24, 1969, pp. 327–30. In English, see W. F. Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight: An Historical Survey of Magic and Divination in Russia*, Stroud, 1999, pp. 392–93.

⁴ For more on Maxim's time in Italy and Greece and his debt to Renaissance thought and Greek Orthodox theology, see Jack Haney, *From Italy to Muscovy: The Life and Works of Maxim the Greek*, Munich, 1971; Aleksei Ivanov, 'Maksim Grek i ital'ianskoe Vozrozhdenie', *Vizantiiskii vremennik*, 33, 1972, pp. 140–57; 34, 1973, pp. 112–19; 35, 1973, pp. 119–36; D. Obolensky, 'Italy, Mount Athos and Muscovy: The Three Worlds of Maximos the Greek (c. 1470–1556)', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 67, 1981, pp. 143–61; Arno Langelier, *Byzantijn en humanist in Rusland. Een onderzoek naar enkele van zijn bronnen en denkbeelden*, Amsterdam, 1986; Hugh Olmsted, 'A Learned Greek Monk in Muscovite Exile: Maksim the Greek and the Old Testament Prophets', *Modern Greek Studies Yearbook*, 3, 1987, pp. 1–73.

to them the earth at this time was to suffer 'indubitable mutation, variation and alteration such as we have scarce perceived for many centuries', as a result of a great conjunction of the planets in Pisces.⁵ In the intervening quarter of a century this doom-laden prediction gave rise to much trepidation across Europe, with at least 160 works addressing the issue.⁶

Whilst Stöffler and Pflaum made no specific mention of a flood, many subsequent commentators wrote of a cataclysmic deluge. These dire predictions drew on the influential astrological theories of the ninth-century Islamic scholar Abu Ma'shar al-Balkhi (787–886), who in the *Great Conjunctions* outlined how pivotal historical and religious events occurred at moments when planetary conjunctions took place. Indeed, many early sixteenth-century European astrologers seized on Abu Ma'shar's calculations that the original deluge was on 17 February 3102 BC, when a great conjunction of the planets in the last phase of Pisces had taken place.⁷

Both Catholics and Lutherans were swept up in the tide of panic that engulfed Europe in the period immediately preceding 1524. On the one hand, some Catholics viewed the conjunction as a sign of Luther being a false prophet and consequently a herald of a time of great tribulation. Many Lutherans, on the other hand, saw the conjunction as a sign that their leader had been chosen to save them from the waters of the second Flood.⁸ Thus, amidst a period of profound religious schism between Lutheranism and Catholicism, and extensive military conflict between Charles V of the Habsburg Empire and Francis I of France, many people across Europe in the early sixteenth century were swayed by the bleak predictions of an imminent flood. The all-consuming nature of what Pierre Bayle (1647–1706) called the 'great terror all over Europe' was such that the French Huguenot thinker commented that 'Princes, and even learned men, were afraid of that calamity as well as the people'.⁹

In Vienna, for example, the court astrologer Georg Tannstetter noted on 20 March 1523 that:

This rumour [about the impending flood] has already taken root everywhere [. . .] it has provoked the wise and the learned to heated debate, and in some it has caused such consternation that they can no longer manage

⁵ Thorndike, *A History of Magic*, 5, p. 181.

⁶ Denis Crouzet, 'Millennial Eschatologies in Italy, Germany, and France: 1500–1533', *Journal of Millennial Studies*, 1, 1999, 2, pp. 1–8 (p. 5).

⁷ B. L. van der Waerden, 'The Conjunction of 3102 B.C.', *Centaurus*, 24, 1980, pp. 117–31 (p. 125).

⁸ Crouzet, 'Millennial Eschatologies', p. 5.

⁹ Pierre Bayle, *The Dictionary Historical and Critical of Mr Peter Bayle*, 2nd edn, 5 vols, London, 1734–38, 5, p. 243.

their affairs properly: they sell their lands, fields and other properties [...] because they believe it will be easier to convey money up to the mountains.¹⁰

Moreover, in Italy, as Ottavia Niccoli has demonstrated, there was a case of collective panic regarding the imminent onset of a deluge: so much so that the carnival season in Rome in February 1524 was saturated with flood themes. The carnival included a float representing Noah's Ark, for example, whilst Archbishop Marco Corner created another float on 'which was a boat being prepared to flee the deluge, and inside there was a very good musical group with lutes and viols'.¹¹ In Florence, the extent of the anxiety concerning the predictions of a flood is aptly demonstrated by Niccolò Machiavelli, who mocked these general fears through lewd, carnivalesque humour:

Because all the astrologers and diviners have bewildered you, according to what many have understood, [by saying] that horrible and strange weather threatens all lands [with] plague, flood, and war, lightning, storms, earthquakes [and] destruction, as if it were already the end of the world, and they insist that the stars will overflow with so much water that the whole world will be covered. Thus, graceful and beautiful women, if ever you were pleased to make use of something on top of you [...] come away with us to the top of our high rocks.¹²

This colourful and bawdy first-hand account of the atmosphere at carnival time in Florence in 1524 wonderfully captures the mood of the city's inhabitants. According to Niccoli the prediction of a flood *in piscibus* 'had a vast and far-reaching resonance', as testified by its pre-eminence during the carnival season in Italy in 1524. However, this 'far-reaching resonance', unbeknown to Western scholars, also extended eastwards into the Orthodox lands of Muscovite Russia.¹³

2. *The Russian Context*

The explosive mix of eschatology and astrology, central to the controversy surrounding the great conjunction of 1524, had already created a religious furore in Russia in the last years of the fifteenth century. The official doctrine of the Orthodox Church in Russia stipulated that the end of the world would occur in 1492, that is in 7000 *anno mundi*. Belief in this eventuality was such that until 1490 the Church had not sought

¹⁰ Zambelli, *Many Ends*, pp. 325–26.

¹¹ Marino Sanudo, *I Diarii*, ed. Rinaldo Furin et al., 58 vols, Venice, 1879–1902, 35, cols 422–23. See also, Niccoli, *Prophecy and Power*, p. 142.

¹² Niccolò Machiavelli, *Opere*, ed. Ezio Raimondi, Milan, 1976, p. 958. See also, Niccoli, *Prophecy and Power*, p. 155.

¹³ N. V. Sinitsyna, *Tretii Rim. Istoki i evoliutsiia russkoi srednevekovoi kontseptsii (XV–XVI vv.)*, Moscow, 1998, p. 176.

to calculate the paschal canon, which determined the date of Easter, for after 1492.¹⁴

The religious ferment around this time in Russia was greatly exacerbated by the rise of the so-called Judaizer (Zhidoovstvuiushchie) movement, which emerged in Novgorod in the early 1470s. According to the rapid anti-Judaizer, Joseph Sanin of Volokolamsk (c. 1440–1515), the movement was brought to Russia in 1470 by a Kievan Jew named Skharia, who was ‘an instrument of the devil’ and ‘learned in all evil inventions: magic and black books, stargazing and astrology’.¹⁵ Moreover, Sanin goes on to state that the Judaizer movement soon gained support in prominent Novgorod circles, including a priest named Aleksei and the high-ranking diplomat Fedor Kuritsyn:

In this time Aleksei the priest and Fedor Kuritsyn had influence on the grand prince like no other. They engaged in astronomy, astrology, magic and [the study of] black books and other false teachings. Many joined them because of this and became stuck in the depths of apostasy.¹⁶

The perceived threat of the Judaizers was felt most acutely in relation to their use of astronomical calculations to argue against the belief in the imminent end of the world. The Judaizers’ main weapon in this regard was the utilization of the astronomical set of tables called *Six Wings* (*Shestokryl*), compiled in 1365 by Immanuel Ben Jacob Bonfils.

In order to counter the Judaizers’ arguments Archbishop Gennadii of Novgorod chose to enlist a skilled astronomer and mathematician from Catholic Germany by the name of Nicolaus Bülow. For well over a decade Bülow worked for Archbishop Gennadii in Novgorod and aided the cleric in his concerted efforts to eradicate the Judaizer movement. It is known, for example, that Bülow helped to translate two fourteenth-century anti-Jewish tracts — Nicholas de Lyra’s *Quaestiones disputate contra Hebraeos* and the *Rationes breues magni rabi Samuelis iudei nati*. These works attacked Jewish beliefs and their calendar.¹⁷ Some time after 1504 Bülow left Novgorod and spent several years working at the Papal court in Rome during the reign of Julius II (1503–13), who is known to have been favourable towards astrology.¹⁸ By 1508 Bülow

¹⁴ For more on the calendar question in Muscovy in the late fifteenth century, see H. R. Huttenbach, ‘Muscovy’s Calendar Controversy of 1491–1492’, *Science and History: Studies in Honor of Edward Rosen (Studia Copernicana)*, 16, 1978, pp. 187–203.

¹⁵ Iosif Volotskii, ‘Prosvetitel’, *Biblioteka Iakova Krotova* <www.krotov.info/acts/16/1/1505pros_rus2.html> [accessed 4 May 2009] (*Predislovie*, para. 13).

¹⁶ *Ibid.* (*predislovie* para. 25).

¹⁷ David B. Miller, ‘The Lübeckers Bartholomäus Ghotan and Nicolaus Bülow in Novgorod and Moscow and The Problem of Early Western Influences on Russian Culture’, *Vistor*, 9, 1978, pp. 395–412 (p. 402).

¹⁸ It is known that Julius II sought the most favourable astrological moment for the foundation of Galliera Castle and the erection of his own statue in Bologna. See Thorndike, *A History of Magic*, 6, p. 150.

was residing in Moscow, where he became chief physician to Vasiliï III. According to the Habsburg ambassador Francesco da Collo, writing in 1518, Bülow was 'a professor of medicine and of astrology and wise in all sciences'.¹⁹

Thus, in bringing Bülow to Russia, Gennadiï had unwittingly introduced a stargazing viper into his Orthodox nest.²⁰ It is arguable that if Bülow would have limited his use of astrology to the medical sphere he would have largely avoided the ire of the Orthodox Church. However, the German increasingly became embroiled in highly contentious religious questions. At some point before 1515, for example, he wrote a letter in defence of the union of the Greek and Latin Churches to Vassian Sanin, the Archbishop of Rostov.²¹

In either 1520 or 1521 Bülow raised the stakes considerably by incorporating an eschatological element into his astrological predictions. He did this by producing a Russian translation of Stöffler and Pflaum's *Almanach nova*. In doing so he sought to acquaint the Muscovite court and the church authorities with the furore surrounding the predictions of a deluge associated with the great conjunction of 1524. Indeed, Maxim the Greek refers to the fact that the publication was on sale at markets in Moscow, Pskov and, possibly, Rostov.²²

As an ardent Catholic and a staunch believer in astrology Bülow would have most likely viewed Luther as a false prophet, whose appearance, as Denis Crouzet notes, was linked to the grand conjunction and onset of the long-awaited Tribulation.²³ During this period of intense upheaval Bülow predicted that there would soon be 'a new transformation, a new law and a new monarchy and both the clergy and the people will live in purity'.²⁴ In other words, he was prophesying that the Holy Roman Emperor would be victorious over the Ottoman Turks, thereby facilitating an era of Christian unity and brotherhood. This achievement — crucially brought about by Catholic leadership — would then herald Christ's Second Coming.

Thus Bülow's translation of Stöffler and Pflaum's *Almanach nova* was an act of religious (and political) propaganda, designed to convince his

¹⁹ *Polnoe sobranie russkikh letopisei*, 6, Moscow, 1853, p. 266; V. Malinin, *Starets Eleazarova Monastyria Filofei: ego poslaniiia. Istoriko-literaturnoe izsledovanie*, Kiev, 1901, p. 261; Miller, 'Lübeckers', p. 405.

²⁰ Joseph L. Wiczyński, 'Hermetism and Cabalism in the Heresy of the Judaizers', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 28, 1975, 1, pp. 17–28 (p. 27).

²¹ Sinitsyna, *Tretii Rim*, p. 176.

²² Maxim, *Tvoreniia*, 1, pp. 429–30.

²³ Crouzet, 'Millennial Eschatologies', p. 5.

²⁴ Gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii muzei, Moscow, Sinodal'noe sobranie, no. 384, ll. 365–66. Also see, Sinitsyna, *Tretii Rim*, p. 178. The unpublished manuscripts of Maxim the Greek held at the Gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii muzei contain verbatim citations from Nicolaus Bülow, such as the current example. See 'Bumaga nechina nekoego rodom, ucheniem zhe i veroiu latynina astrologin'.

Muscovite audience about the inevitable and impending triumph of the Catholic Church. Unsurprisingly, this potent binding of astrology with Catholic eschatological prediction elicited a distinct sense of acute unease from many within the Orthodox Church, from whom the most eloquent critique was supplied by Maxim the Greek.

3. *Maxim the Greek's Response to Bülow*

If Bülow's mix of astrological science and eschatology had fallen on unreceptive ears in Moscow, his grand predictions would have either simply been ignored by church officials or, more likely, he would have been punished as a heretic. However, the German's arguments were favourably received by both prominent courtiers *and* sections within the Orthodox Church itself. Why did Bülow's dramatic prognostications attract support among Muscovite courtiers and clergymen? It is possible that some were swayed by a sense of anticipation at the impending arrival of a crucial period in the biblical drama. After all, an infectious spirit of expectancy, mixed with profound anxiety, was sweeping across Europe at the time. Moreover, those of an inquisitive frame of mind might well have been drawn to the pseudo-scientific basis of Bülow's astrological predictions. It is also possible that some figures in Muscovy were attracted to the fatalistic dimension of astrology, whereby human free will is sacrificed to the whims of the stars. Whatever the reasons for its appeal in Muscovy, the great majority of church officials would have viewed Bülow's prediction as an alarming development that attacked the basic tenets of accepted Orthodox faith. This called for a swift and decisive response from talented polemicists from within their own ranks.

One such response was supplied by Filofei, a monk from the Pskov-Eleazarov Monastery. In either 1523 or 1524 he wrote to Mikhail Grigor'evich Munekhin (d. 1528), chastizing the diplomat and Pskov official for falling under the sway of Bülow's charms. Filofei writes that astrological beliefs are simply fables (*basni*) and blasphemy (*koshchunstvo*). More specifically, he lambasts Munekhin for giving credence to Bülow's predictions about the great conjunction of 1524. According to Filofei, the stars cannot foretell the onset of the second Flood, when all towns, kingdoms and countries will cease to exist. Drawing on Acts 3:21, Filofei argues that only God, and not the stars, have the power to bring about the restitution of all things.²⁵

Filofei concentrated his attack on Bülow by adopting a historical and eschatological approach in order to explain decisive moments in the

²⁵ D. S. Likhachev and L. A. Dmitrieva (eds), *Biblioteka literatury drevnei Rusi*, 9, St Petersburg, 2000, pp. 291–93.

history of countries and monarchies. In this regard, it is highly significant that Filofei's renowned doctrine of Russia as the Third Rome was first articulated in his epistle to Munekhin. Consequently, Bülow's astrological prediction can be seen as one of the principal catalysts for spurring Filofei to develop his religious thesis. Based on biblical exegesis and a historical/eschatological approach to pivotal ecclesiastical events, Filofei argued that the first Rome had fallen with the coronation of Charlemagne in 800. Furthermore, the second Rome, that is Constantinople, had fallen as a result of the union of the Greek Orthodox Church with the Roman Catholic Church, agreed at the Council of Florence in 1439.²⁶

Subsequently, in Filofei's mind Russia became the Third Rome, as its church had retained its pure spirit. What is more, Filofei's telling assertion that there would not be another Rome was significantly based on an exegetical analysis of the Book of Revelation. In particular, he interpreted chapter 12:6 of Revelation, which states 'and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she hath a place prepared of God' and chapter 12:10, in which it is prophesied that 'now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God'.²⁷

The refutation articulated by Filofei has resonated down the ages, but was not as extensive or, I would argue, as learned as that offered by Maxim the Greek between 1518–24. The Greek theologian was a relative newcomer to Muscovy, having only arrived in Moscow in March 1518. He had been invited by Vasiliï III initially to translate Greek patristic commentaries on the Psalter. Prior to his arrival in Moscow Maxim had spent twelve or thirteen years as a monk in the Monastery of Vatopedi on Mount Athos. However, before his time at the centre of Eastern Orthodox monasticism, Maxim had spent around twelve years in Renaissance Italy. Between 1492 and 1496 Maxim (or Michael Trivolis as he was then known) lived and studied in Florence, where he was influenced by the Greek philologist John Lascaris and the renowned philosopher Marsilio Ficino. This was followed by two years in Venice, where he had close contact with Aldus Manutius, the famed printer and publisher of Greek classics. Significantly, in 1498 Maxim moved to Mirandola, where he was employed by Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, the nephew (and editor) of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, who shared his uncle's fierce anti-astrological beliefs. Maxim's last two years in Italy were spent at the San Marco Monastery in Florence, where Savanorola had been

²⁶ Sinitsyna, *Tretii Rim*, pp. 228–35.

²⁷ Citations from the King James Version. For an in-depth analysis of Filofei's articulation of his thesis of Russia being the Third Rome, see Sinitsyna, *Tretii Rim*, pp. 174–252.

prior.²⁸ This rich philosophical and theological background proved invaluable for Maxim in 1521, when he sought to articulate his refutations of Bülow's extraordinary predictions.

In practice Maxim adopted a three-pronged approach in order to counter Bülow's claims and to weaken their appeal to the Muscovite court and clergy. First, he wrote a series of polemics specifically tackling the religious and astrological arguments propounded by Bülow. Indeed, three extant letters are directly addressed to Bülow: 'Against Nikolai the Latin — a sermon about the emanation of the Holy Spirit'; 'An epistle to the polymath Nikolai the German', and 'Against Nikolai the German, fraud and astrologer'.²⁹ As one would expect, the tone of these epistles and sermons is severe. Bülow is branded a false prophet who speaks 'from his belly (from the wisdom of the flesh), and not according to the evangelical statutes and theology'. Moreover, through 'superstitious contrivances' he is able to 'charm the hearts of simple-minded people'.³⁰

In addition to these direct attacks Maxim also wrote to courtiers who harboured sympathetic attitudes towards Bülow's astrological and religious teachings. In one such letter for example, entitled 'An instructive epistle to a certain prince about the falsehood of astrology and comfort [for those] living in sorrow', Maxim warns the courtier about the ills stemming from harmful foreign influences:

Many different illnesses occur when our body is decaying: firstly, due to the entry and distribution of several unpleasant and irregular elements into our body, and secondly, by divine observance difficult circumstances occur in our souls in order to lead to knowledge and to correct our sins.³¹

In other words, Maxim is decrying the harmful effects of Bülow's alien doctrines, which are spreading disease throughout the body of Orthodox Russia. According to Maxim, the remedy for such ills is not to be found from the medicines dispensed by foreign physicians, but by adherence to the Holy Scriptures. The tone taken by Maxim in this letter is akin to a teacher disappointed at the erroneous approach adopted by his students. He is stern, but not abusive, and the letter is imbued with a sense of hope that the offenders will rectify their ways.

Evidently Maxim was particularly concerned about what he saw as Bülow's pernicious influence on the court diplomat Fedor Ivanovich Karpov (d. 1545), as he entered into direct correspondence with this

²⁸ Obolensky, *Three Worlds*, p. 146.

²⁹ The Russian titles are as follows: *Protiv Nikolaia latinianina — slovo ob iskhozhdenii Sviatago Dukha*; *Poslanie ko mnogouchitel'nomu Nikolaiu nemchinu*; *Protiv Nikolaia nemchina obmanschika i zvezdochetsa*. See Maxim, *Tvoreniia*, 2, pp. 191–202, 202–06 and 275–76 respectively.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

senior official.³² The general tone of Maxim's correspondence with Karpov is respectful and conciliatory. In a lengthy epistle directed against Karpov's espousal of astrology, for example, Maxim sought to demonstrate the latter's erroneous views by gentle persuasion. The cleric emphasizes that he is seeking to cure Karpov of his ill-founded stance 'for the sake of love'. Furthermore, he flatters the diplomat by calling him 'most wise' (*premudryi*).³³

Lastly, Maxim also wrote an epistle to 'a certain monk [holding] the post of Father Superior in regard to the foreign deception [*nemetskaia prelest*] by the name of Fortune and about her wheel'.³⁴ In the letter he sought to respectfully reprimand his fellow Orthodox cleric for dallying with Bülow's teachings: 'I being bound to your reverence with such love, would consider it wrong, beloved brother, if I were to remain silent, seeing that you follow the Greek, Chaldean and Latin teachings, devised by demons'.³⁵ The epistle then continues with Maxim expressing surprise that 'such a person, more experienced than others in knowledge of the divinely inspired scriptures' is so quickly 'attracted by such impious teachings [as propounded by] the fraud Nikolai the German'.³⁶

The manner in which Maxim directed his attack towards the intellectual position espoused by Bülow, alongside epistles to both religious and civil figures, corresponds to Pico della Mirandola's assertion that astrology negatively impacts on three areas of human life: the intellectual, the religious and the civil.³⁷ Moreover, Maxim's exposition of his arguments against astrology is extremely redolent of the methodology used by Pico in his *Disputationes adversus astrologiam*, which was published posthumously in 1495 by Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola.³⁸

³² See *ibid.*, pp. 206–25. See also N. K. Nikol'skii, 'Materialy dlia istorii drevnerusskoi dukhovnoi pis'mennosti', *Khristianskoe Chtenie*, 8–9, 1909, pp. 1119–25.

³³ Maxim, *Tvorenüia*, 2, pp. 214, 224.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 270–75. 'Poslanie k nekotomu inoku, sanom igumenu, o nemetskoi prelesti imenuemoi Fortunoiu, i o kolese eia.'

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 270–71.

³⁷ Sheila J. Rabin, 'Two Renaissance Views of Astrology: Pico and Kepler', unpublished PhD, City University of New York, 1987, p. 53.

³⁸ In her discussion of Maxim the Greek's defence of free will against astrology, Sinitsyna makes no reference to the influence of Pico della Mirandola. Instead, she refers to the debate on free will between Erasmus and Luther that took place between September 1524 and February 1526. The former initiated the argument by publishing *On the Free Will: Diatribe or Discussion* in September 1524. Luther replied in December 1525 with *Bondage of the Will*. In turn, in February 1526 Erasmus replied to Luther's work. However, these works postdate those by Maxim the Greek. Thus, I would argue that Maxim's arguments in favour of free will, expounded in a dialogue with Bülow against astrology, were formulated in the light of Pico's exposition of similar views in the 1490s. This is supported by his close relationship with Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola at the turn of the sixteenth century. See Sinitsyna, *Treti Rim*, p. 182. For more on the Erasmus-Luther debate, see Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, Chicago, IL, 2008, pp. 146–61.

Having spent four years employed by Gianfrancesco in Mirandola, Maxim would have been well schooled in the Piconian criticism of astrology. One should bear in mind that Gianfrancesco was not simply his uncle's editor but had also 'fully developed the teaching of the *Disputationes*'.³⁹

According to Pico, astrology was wholly incompatible with Christianity as a religion based on revelation and on man's free will. Indeed, Pico argued that astrology was a dangerous doctrine that offered man a fundamentally different philosophy towards life and the world, which actively distracted and led man away from God:

[Astrology] corrupts all philosophy, adulterates medicine, weakens religion, generates or reinforces superstition, fosters idolatry, destroys prudence, pollutes morals, disgraces the heavens, makes men miserable, anxious, restless, slaves instead of free and quite unfortunate in doing almost everything.⁴⁰

Thus, significantly, Pico perceived astrology as a general conception of reality and of history that had the power to undermine the foundations of Christian society on all levels.

In the opening book of *Disputationes* Pico methodically draws on religious authority in order to counter what he regarded as the perfidious influence of astrology. He lays significant stress on the oracles of the prophets found in the Bible, alongside a powerful elucidation of anti-astrological thinking evident in patristic literature, particularly leaning on the writings of Augustine, Eusebius, Tertullian and Origen. What is more, he cites canon law as a powerful authority against astrology.⁴¹ Crucially, he also cites the opposition to astrology evident in the thinking of Plato and Aristotle, who embody a form of philosophy based on reason.⁴²

Alongside authority, a notable and original feature of the *Disputationes* is Pico's in-depth analysis of the history of astrology. This begins with a discussion of the beliefs of the ancient Chaldeans and Egyptians, who 'naturally ascribed everything to the stars' as they 'continuously devoted themselves to measuring the movement of the heavens and observing the courses of the stars'.⁴³ Lastly, Pico sought to drive a wedge between what he saw as the worthy scientific pursuit of astronomy and the thoroughly disreputable beliefs associated with astrology:

³⁹ Eugenio Garin, *Astrology in the Renaissance: The Zodiac of Life*, London, 1983, p. 96.

⁴⁰ Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem*, ed. Eugenio Garin, 3 vols, Florence, 1946–52, 1, p. 44.

⁴¹ Rabin, *Two Renaissance Views*, p. 48.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 48, 86.

⁴³ Pico, *Disputationes*, 2, pp. 498, 500, 502.

When I say astrology, I do not mean that art which measures the size and motions of the stars by mathematical calculations, a sure and noble art which is very worthy in its merits [...] but that art which predicts future occurrences from the stars.⁴⁴

The anti-astrological writings of Maxim are strikingly similar to those propounded by Pico in their fundamental espousal of human free will and their unerring faith in divine providence. In a lengthy epistle to Fedor Karpov, for example, he decries 'the false science regarding the stars [...] which overthrows all divine laws', in which virtues and vices are dependent upon the arbitrary and despotic changes in celestial movements.⁴⁵ One must conclude from this position, Maxim argues, that 'the most benevolent God is the initiator and creator of evil. You see the stars in essence are his creation'.⁴⁶

This argument is elaborated upon in another tract, entitled *About the fact that Divine Providence and not the stars or the wheel of fortune govern the fate of humans*.⁴⁷ Herein Maxim reflects that 'our minds have the power and the strength to follow or oppose whoever we want'. Thus, Maxim reasons that goodness in humans is not dictated by the stars, but by three factors: 1) holy powers which always lead us to goodness; 2) a natural propensity in humans towards goodness; and 3) the undertaking of good actions. Evil, on the other hand, exists due to 1) human passion; 2) the work of demons; and 3) evil actions.⁴⁸ One also hears a distinct echo of Pico's anti-astrological stance when Maxim chastises a fellow Orthodox monk for following a doctrine that is 'alien to divine providence, the infallible and God-devoted reason of the prophecies, and the God-inspired Scriptures'.⁴⁹

In support of his repudiation of astrology Maxim also closely follows the Piconian model. In other words he constructs his argument by drawing extensively on religious authority and historical examples and discourse, as well as highlighting what he regards as the positive merits of the reason-based philosophy of Plato and Aristotle. An emphasis is also placed on the intrinsic difference between the pursuit of worthy scientific endeavours, such as astronomy, and the dangerous folly of being swayed by astrology. However, as mentioned, Maxim did not simply transplant Pico's ideas wholesale into Moscow; rather he astutely adapted the Italian's model to fit into the religious and

⁴⁴ Ibid., I, p. 40. Also quoted in Rabin, *Two Renaissance Views*, p. 47.

⁴⁵ Maxim, *Tvoreniiia*, 2, p. 210.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 211.

⁴⁷ The Russian title is: 'O tom, chto Promyslom Bozhiim, a ne zvezdami i krugom schastiia ustraivaetsia chelovecheskaia sud'ba.' See *ibid.*, pp. 225–39.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 234.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 271.

cultural context of his adopted homeland. In brief, this entailed drawing on the heritage of Eastern and Western Church Fathers, Byzantine canonical law and historical examples, which still resonated powerfully in early sixteenth-century Moscow.

In by far his longest epistle to Karpov, for example, Maxim immediately begins his denunciation of astrology by turning to the authority of the Church Fathers:

We suggest to you the many notable Christian teachers, who, so to say, laid bare before you and manifestly pointed to the fraud of studiously observing the movement of the stars, and far repudiated this teaching from the holy enclosure of the Church, so that from their words, which are brought to us, you may fully study the truth.⁵⁰

He cites Basil of Caesarea, John Chrysostomos and Augustine as figures who warned of the dangers of astrology as an instrument of the devil. Indeed, Maxim paraphrases the latter's *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, when he states 'that [astrology] is the invention of the devil and by means of secret intercourse with the devil [it is possible] to prophesy about the future and to divinate about events'.⁵¹ Maxim also stresses the fundamental place of revealed prophecy, rather than astrological prediction. In this regard he illustrates to Karpov how the 'righteous Ezekiel' did not resort to 'divining by the stars or to observing the songs and flights of birds'; instead, he draws on Ezekiel 26 when describing how the Old Testament prophet went with 'heart-felt tears and grief to the All-Mighty to save him from sin' when he had the vision of the destruction of the city walls of Tyre.⁵²

Interestingly, Maxim also includes a long quotation from *The Clementine Homilies* in his disputation against astrology. This tract was purportedly written by Pope Clement I (fl. 96) and tells the story of a dialogue between his father, Faustus, and the apostle Peter. It is treated with utter credulity by Maxim, who introduces the story in the following manner: 'Faust, the father of Clement, as a Greek and experienced in astrology, tried to convince and demonstrate to Peter that there was no divine providence, but that everything was dependent upon birth (under the known planet) and from fate, which

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 207.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 210. Compare with the words of Augustine in *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*: 'Hence, we must admit that when astrologers speak the truth, they are speaking by a mysterious instinct that moves a man's mind without his knowing it. When this happens for the purpose of deceiving men, it is the work of evil spirits. To these spirits some knowledge of the truth about the temporal order has been granted [...] But sometimes these wicked spirits also feign the power of divination and foretell what they themselves intend to do.' See Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, ed. John Hammond Taylor, New York, 1982, 1, p. 72.

⁵² Maxim, *Tvoreniiia*, 2, p. 220.

the Romans called “fortune”.⁵³ There then follows nearly the entirety of Peter’s arguments against astrology, which conclude with the apostle reiterating its blasphemous nature:

Most certainly it is. For if all the sins of men, and all their acts of impiety and licentiousness, owe their origin to the stars, and if the stars have been appointed by God to do this work, so as to be the efficient causes of all evils, then the sins of all are traced up to Him who placed Genesis in the stars.⁵⁴

Like Pico, Maxim argues that Plato refuted astrological thought, stressing that he was ‘the very first external philosopher’ and that he ‘expelled [astrology] far from the general philosophical statutes of his philosophy’.⁵⁵ Indeed, in the epistle he wrote to ‘a certain monk’ Maxim also follows the Piconian model of providing a history of the origins and acceptance of astrology. Thus, it is noted that ‘the false teaching received its origins from Zoroaster and other ancient magicians, residing in Persia’.⁵⁶ Thenceforth, it was energetically embraced by the Egyptians, and then the Greeks, who according to Maxim ‘invented many other villainous abuses’.⁵⁷ One such abuse, as stated by Maxim, was the wheel of fortune, which was described in the *Tabula* by Cebes the Theban.⁵⁸

By far the largest section of Maxim’s epistle to Karpov is devoted to the highly controversial (and topical) question of whether astrology can aid rulers in their onerous duties. It is evident that in broaching this thorny subject Maxim is seeking to directly refute Karpov’s positive evaluation of astrology:

You say that nobody from ancient royalty and the most glorious and valiant military leaders achieved anything without observing the stars for forewarnings and answers. On this basis you explain that the science is necessary, as it preserves and strengthens in human society that which in it is all the more honest.⁵⁹

The first line of attack utilized by Maxim is to cite various examples from classical history, which demonstrate the falsehood of Karpov’s claim. Initially Maxim refers to the military exploits of Scipio Africanus

⁵³ Ibid., p. 221.

⁵⁴ Revd Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (eds), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325, Volume VIII: The Twelve Patriarchs, Excerpts and Epistles, The Clementia, Apocrypha, Decretals, Memoirs of Edessa and Syriac Documents, Remains of the First Ages*, Grand Rapids, MN, 1977, p. 306.

⁵⁵ Maxim, *Tvorenüa*, 2, p. 211.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 271.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ See *The Tablature of Cebes the Theban, a disciple of Socrates. Being an Allegorical picture of human life*, trans. Samuel Boyse, Glasgow, 1750, p. 11, pp. 34–35.

⁵⁹ Maxim, *Tvorenüa*, 2, p. 211.

the Elder (236–183 BC) against Carthage. He asserts that it is not written down in any sources that the Roman general was inspired by astrological predictions to leave Rome and to attack Hannibal's powerbase.⁶⁰ This example is followed by questioning whether astrological predictions played a role in the bravery and courage displayed by Julius Caesar in his Gallic campaign.⁶¹ The senatorial decree issued against astrologers in AD 52, during the reign of Claudius, is also referred to by Maxim, who states that they were regarded 'as fraudsters and seducers and not as philosophers'.⁶²

After these Roman examples, Maxim proceeds to question Karpov as to where in the histories of Alexander the Great it is written that 'he achieved his glorious and brave deeds over the course of thirteen years by means of Aristotelian astrology'? The Greek theologian then reveals even more knowledge of ancient history by demonstrating that Thucydides at no point refers to astrology in his account of the naval exploits of Themistocles against the fleet of Xerxes at the Battle of Salamis in 479 BC.⁶³

Moving from the ancient to the modern, Maxim then draws on personal reminiscences of his time in Milan at the close of the fifteenth century when he refers to the ruinous influence of the astrologer Ambrogio Varese da Rosate (1437–1522) on Ludovico Sforza, the Duke of Milan (1452–1508).⁶⁴ According to Maxim, Ludovico's indulgence in astrological falsehood was such that 'even if it was necessary [for him] to sit on a horse, and if Ambrogio happened to be there and said to him that the hour was not beneficial, then he would remove his feet from the stirrups'. Indeed, the duke would only depart 'when permitted [to do so] by astrology'.⁶⁵ Thus, Maxim writes that it was as a direct consequence of his dependence upon astrology that the duke was defeated by the French army of Louis XII in 1499 and died in captivity the following year.⁶⁶

Moreover, Maxim lambasts the pernicious influence of dishonest philosophers in other parts of the Italian peninsula who 'do violence to our great sacraments'.⁶⁷ Specific reference in this regard is made to Niccolò Lelio Cosmico (d. c. 1500), a court poet and humanist from Ferrara who, according to the disparaging Maxim, proclaimed on his

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 212.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 214.

⁶⁴ On Maxim's acquaintance with the astrological views of Rosate, see É. Denisoff, *Maxime le Grec et l'Occident. Contribution à l'histoire de la pensée religieuse et philosophique de Michel Trivolis*, Paris-Louvain, 1943, p. 200; Ivanov, 'Maksim Grek', p. 146.

⁶⁵ Maxim, *Tvoreniiia*, 2, p. 258.

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 258–59.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 280.

deathbed that 'tomorrow I shall be laid to rest in the Elysian Fields with Socrates and Plato'.⁶⁸ Maxim also singles out Agostino Nifo of Sessa (1473–1546) as a Neapolitan astrologer with a particular hatred of 'our faith and its rites'.⁶⁹ Switching to Russian examples, Maxim also argues that no ruler after Vladimir's conversion in 988 resorted to astrology against the Tatar threat from the east. In particular, he cites the renowned victory of Grand Prince Dmitrii Donskoi against Mamai at the Battle of Kulikovo in 1380 as an example of how Russian rulers did not turn to astrologers at decisive moments.⁷⁰

Another distinct feature of Maxim's polemic with Karpov is his wish to illustrate how divine intervention, rather than astrological meddling, aided David, Gideon and Constantine the Great in their greatest military victories. In regard to the biblical figures of David and Gideon, Maxim is livid that Karpov should think that they achieved their 'notable and miraculous victories' by divination from the stars and from the flight and songs of birds. He asks Karpov whether 'you consider the appearance of angels [to Gideon] as some kind of astrology'. Furthermore, Maxim remarks how David consulted with God by way of a garment — the ephod — worn by the high priest, when seeking direction against Saul's intrigues.⁷¹

Maxim also refutes Karpov's suggestion that Constantine the Great was swayed by astrology. In this regard he turns to Eusebius's *Life of Constantine* to demonstrate the divine nature of the first Christian emperor's victory over Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge in AD 312. Thus, whilst Maxentius is described by Maxim as being 'zealously devoted' to 'divination, magic and astrological deceptions',⁷² Constantine received divine help when, as Eusebius writes, 'he saw [...] the trophy of a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, and bearing the inscription, CONQUER BY THIS'.⁷³

In his concerted effort to trounce Karpov's arguments in favour of astrology Maxim also astutely draws on the highly influential work of Matthew Blastares, a Greek Orthodox monk, theological writer and Byzantine legal authority. In particular Maxim draws on Blastares's magnum opus, the *Syntagma Alphanumericum* (1335), which alphabetically

⁶⁸ Ibid. Maxim refers to 'a certain Kobezmik Ferrarskii'. Both V. N. Zabugin and V. S. Ikonnikov argue that Maxim is here referring to Cosmico. See V. N. Zabugin, 'Iulii Pomponii Let: "Kriticheskoe issledovanie"', *Istoricheskoe obozrenie*, 18, 1914, p. 16; Ikonnikov, pp. 113–14.

⁶⁹ Ibid. For more on Nifo, see Thorndike, *A History of Magic*, 5, pp. 69–93.

⁷⁰ Maxim, *Tvoreniia*, 2, p. 213.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 219.

⁷² Ibid., p. 214.

⁷³ Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (eds), *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, second series, 14 vols, Grand Rapids, MN, 1952–56, 1, p. 490.

listed church and civil laws. It was translated into Russian in the early sixteenth century, and quickly became established as *the* authoritative source for both church and state legal procedures.⁷⁴

More specifically, Maxim draws on *Syntagma Alphabeticum* in order to provide an Orthodox authority for what is effectively his Piconian approach towards the need to separate reasoned scientific study from the dangerous pursuit of astrology. The opening salvo of Maxim's attack concentrates on Blastares's general assertion that it is forbidden to discuss mathematics, but permissible to study geometry:

If, according to your opinion, our tsar needs the advice of astrologers and without their instruction and advice nothing can be undertaken, then in what manner is the tsar [meant to] define civil laws by manifestly studying mathematics? For the royal law speaks about this with the following words: let geometry be openly taught, but mathematics is condemned as forbidden. Listen deaf people, look blind people! Mathematics, it is said, is condemned as a forbidden practice. The tsar condemns it and expels it from his state, but you claim that it is necessary for the tsar, and [is something] not to be ashamed [of], speaking so patently against the truth.⁷⁵

To the modern reader this division of mathematics and geometry appears somewhat strange. However, by citing Blastares Maxim is adopting a demarcation stressed in the *Corpus Civilis Iuris*, issued by Emperor Justinian between AD 529–34. Indeed, magicians in general in the famed Justinian Code are referred to as *mathematici*.⁷⁶ Moreover, article 9.18.2 states that in AD 294 the Emperors Diocletian and Maximian and the Caesars declared that: 'to learn and apply the science of geometry is to the public interest. But the damnable art of the *mathematicions* is forbidden.'⁷⁷ Emperor Constantius is also cited in Article 9.18.5 of the Justinian Code, when he decreed in AD 357 that 'no one shall consult a *mathematici*', meaning an astrologer.⁷⁸ Throughout Byzantine history astrologers were commonly called *mathematici*, and up until the late seventeenth century in Russia they were also known as *matematiki*.⁷⁹ Thus, in Maxim's mind there was a great

⁷⁴ 'Matthew Blastares', *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/69039/Matthew-Blastares>> [accessed 14 May 2009].

⁷⁵ Matthew Blastares, 'Alfavitnaia Syntagma', in *Biblioteka Iakova Krotova*, <www.krotov.info/acts/canons/vlastar06.html> [accessed 30 April 2009]. (Letter M, ch. 1). Also see Maxim, *Tvoreniia*, 2, p. 215.

⁷⁶ Article 9.18 in the *Codex Iustinianus*, for example, states: 'De maleficiis et mathematicis et ceteris similibus.' This translates as: 'Concerning enchanter, magicians and other similar persons.' See, *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, ed. Paul Krüger, 3 vols, Berlin, 1906, 2, p. 379.

⁷⁷ The Latin text reads: 'Artem geometriae discere atque exerceri publice intersit. Ars autem mathematica damnabilis interdicta est.' See *ibid.*, p. 379.

⁷⁸ The Latin text reads: 'Nemo haruspicem consulat aut mathematicum.' See *ibid.*, p. 380.

⁷⁹ R. A. Simonov, 'Rossiiskie pridvornye "matematiki" XVI–XVII vekov', *Voprosy istorii*, 1986, 1, pp. 76–84 (pp. 76–77).

deal of overlap between ‘mathematicians’ and ‘astrologers’, whereas geometry was viewed as a rational science more akin to what we would understand as astronomy.

Maxim then directly cites Blastares’s section about number diviners (*chislogadateli*). This extract is itself drawn from the commentary on the Thirty-Sixth Canon of the Council of Laodicea (AD 364) by Theodore Balsamon, the twelfth-century canonist of the Greek Orthodox Church:

The followers of mathematics are they who hold the opinion that the celestial bodies rule the universe, and that all earthly things are ruled by their influence. Astrologers are they who divine by the stars through the agency of demons, and place their faith in them.⁸⁰

The commentary by Balsamon confusingly refers to both *mathematici* and astrologers, with the latter being particularly demonized for their divinatory practices.

However, whilst Maxim is adamantly opposed to all forms of astrology, he is keen to stress his endorsement of Blastares’s stance towards the study of the four acceptable mathematical sciences: arithmetic, music, geometry and astronomy. This position effectively permits the study of these disciplines, although Maxim warns that it is forbidden to ‘use them wrongly and to believe that our circumstances are dependent upon the movement of heavenly bodies, and to attempt to find out something about the future’.⁸¹ In this regard Maxim is not only following in the tradition of Blastares, but also of John Zonaras, the renowned twelfth-century Byzantine theologian and chronicler. In his commentary on the Thirty-Sixth Canon of the Council of Laodicea, for example, Zonaras noted that ‘the science of mathematics or astronomy is not at all hereby forbidden’, only ‘the excesses and abuse of that science’.⁸² In other words, Maxim is following a Byzantine tradition that permits astronomical studies as long as they do not veer into the forbidden astrological realm. Such recourse to Byzantine canon law is powerfully deployed by Maxim, as he is then able to refute Karpov’s claim that he is an obscurantist standing in the way of scientific inquiry.

Where is it to be found that I somehow in detail commanded you, Gospodin Feodor [*sic*], or at some time would deter you from studying medicine, or from some other form of philosophical knowledge? Even from the contemplation of the illuminated heavens; knowledge of their

⁸⁰ Maxim, *Tvoreniiia*, 2, p. 215. For Blastares’s commentary, see Blastares, ‘Alfavitnaia’, (‘O chislogadatiakh’, Letter M, ch. 1). For Balsamon’s commentary, see Schaff and Wace, *A Select Library*, 14, p. 151.

⁸¹ Maxim, *Tvoreniiia*, 2, p. 216.

⁸² Schaff and Wace, *A Select Library*, 14, p. 151.

movements and interaction from which arise the changes of the four seasons of the year and which establish for us the months, seasons and years.⁸³

In his polemics addressed to Karpov, Maxim is forthright and persuasive, but is always aware of the need to avoid completely alienating the influential courtier. However, such concerns are wholly absent in his diatribes with Nicolaus Bülow, whom he perceives as his principal foe. Indeed, in the two tracts Maxim wrote that directly related to the great conjunction of 1524, the Greek theologian is keen to stress the battle between good and evil embodied in his personal struggle against Bülow. At the beginning of his tract entitled 'Against those who try to predict the future by means of considering the stars', for example, Maxim incorporates his present conflict with Bülow into a tradition dating back to the Apostle Peter's confrontation with Simon the Magus. Moreover, to stress this link further he then cites the example of St Leo, Bishop of Catania (709–787), who battled against the sorcerer Heliodorus, a man described in the *Vita* of the saint as a servant of the devil.⁸⁴ As Alexander Kazhdan has noted, the Byzantines created a series of Faust-like legends that reached their peak in the Heliodorus story.⁸⁵ Thus, Maxim is deliberately tapping into a potent source, whereby he can place his religious and astrological duel with Bülow within a long tradition of holy figures engaging Faustian sorcerers.

In this tract, Maxim fully articulates the weight of Orthodox authority upon which he is resting his case, prior to directly refuting Bülow's astrological predictions regarding the likelihood of a second Flood in 1524. He begins by providing a long citation from Basil's Sixth Homily on *The Creation of Luminous Bodies*. The crux of the passage cited by Maxim rests on the legal and civil chaos that would ensue if societies endorsed the deterministic basis at the core of astrology:

If the origin of our virtues and of our vices is not in ourselves, but is the fatal consequence of our birth, it is useless for legislators to prescribe for us what we ought to do, and what we ought to avoid: it is useless for judges to honour virtue and punish vice. The guilt is not in the robber, not in the assassin: it was willed for him: it was impossible for him to hold back his hand, urged to evil by inevitable necessity. Those who laboriously cultivate the arts are the maddest of men.⁸⁶

⁸³ Maxim, *Tvoreniia*, 2, p. 222.

⁸⁴ For an account of St Leo's encounters with Heliodorus, see V. Latyshev, *Neizdannye grecheskie agiograficheskie teksty*, St Petersburg, 1914, pp. 12–28.

⁸⁵ Alexander Kazhdan, 'Holy and Unholy Miracle Workers', in Henry Maguire (ed.), *Byzantine Magic*, Washington, D.C., 1995, p. 77.

⁸⁶ Schaff and Wace, *A Select Library*, 8, p. 86. See Maxim, *Tvoreniia*, 2, pp. 244–45.

The extensive quotation from Basil is then quickly followed by a lengthy extract from the fourteenth oration of St Gregory of Nazianzus (330–c. 390):

One school of thought [...] postulates some kind of irrational and indissoluble dominion of the stars that orchestrate our existence to suit themselves [...] and, further, conjunctions and oppositions on the part of certain planets and fixed stars as well as a universal motion that controls all things.⁸⁷

This quotation is less legalistic in tone and, I would argue, in its discussion of conjunctions is utilized by Maxim to prepare the ground for his more direct attack on Bülow's predictions. Similarly, he provides a sizeable extract against astrology from *The Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* by John of Damascus (c. 676–749), which stresses free will and repudiates the predictive powers of stargazing:

Now the Greeks declare that all our affairs are controlled by the rising and setting and collision of these stars [...] for it is with these matters that astrology has to do. But we hold that we get from them signs of rain and drought, cold and heat, moisture and dryness, and of the various winds, and so forth, but no sign whatever as to our actions.⁸⁸

Arguably the most pertinent citation utilized by Maxim (in terms of refuting the predictions concerning the grand conjunction of 1524) comes from Chrysostomos's Seventh Homily on Matthew:

Where then are they who set up the power of a nativity and the cycle of times against the doctrines of the church? For who has ever recorded that another Christ appeared: that such a thing took place? Although they falsely affirm other things, that ten myriads of years passed, yet this they cannot even feign. Of what kind of cycle then would ye speak? For there was never another Sodom, nor another Gomorrah, nor another flood. How long do ye trifle, talking of a cycle and nativity?⁸⁹

Alongside these powerful excerpts from key patristic texts against astrology, Maxim also cites the words of the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah in his efforts to counter the influence of Bülow, who is characterized as a student of the devil, whose teacher makes him wiser by instilling in him 'the secret of beautiful speech and demonstrations

⁸⁷ St Gregory Nazianzus, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation. St. Gregory of Nazianzus: Select Orations*, trans. Martha Vinson, Washington, D.C., 2003, pp. 64–65.

⁸⁸ Schaff and Wace, *A Select Library*, 9, p. 24b. See Maxim, *Prepodobnyi*, 2, pp. 260–61. John of Damascus's work is commonly referred to as the *Bogoslovie* in Russia. It was translated into Old Church Slavonic by John the Exarch of Bulgaria, probably before 893. For more information on the importance of this work in early Rus', see Anne-Laurence Caudano, "Let there be Lights in the Firmament of the Heaven": Cosmological Depictions in Early Rus', in *Palaeoslavica*, 14, 2006, 2, pp. 10–11.

⁸⁹ Schaff and Wace, *A Select Library*, 10, p. 436.

of reasoning in order to deceive the more simple-minded'. Thus, he specifically draws on Isaiah 47:12–14, which addresses the supposed deceptions practised by astrologers, and beseeches Bülow to listen to the words of the Old Testament prophet:⁹⁰

Let now the astrologers, the stargazers, the monthly prognosticators, stand up and save thee from these things that shall come upon thee. Behold they shall be as stubble; the fire shall burn them; they shall not deliver themselves from the power of the flame: there shall not be a coal to warm at, nor fire to sit before it.

This denunciation of astrology is reinforced by a warning from Jeremiah 10:2–3 to 'learn not the way of the heathen' and, what is more, 'not to be dismayed at the signs of heaven, for the heathen are dismayed at them'.

In addition to general refutations of astrology and its purported ability to predict future events, Maxim does directly tackle the predictions of a second Flood, which sprang forth from Stöffler's *Almanach* of 1499. Indeed, he directly draws on the central passage of the almanac, as translated by Bülow:

In the month of February will occur twenty conjunctions [...] of which sixteen will occupy a watery sign, signifying to well nigh the whole, climates, kingdoms, provinces, estates, dignitaries, brutes, beasts of the sea, and to all dwellers on earth indubitable mutation, variation and alteration such as we have scarce perceived for many centuries from historiographers and our elders.⁹¹

According to Maxim, it is as if Bülow 'is laughing at us', that is Orthodox Christians, for upholding the tenets of the Holy Scriptures.⁹² In reply, Maxim cites Genesis 9:11 and 9:15, which contain God's promise to Noah not to inflict another deluge on the earth:

And I will establish my covenant with you; neither shall be flesh cut off any more by the waters of a flood; neither shall there any more be a flood to destroy the earth. (Gen 9:11)

And I will remember my covenant, which is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh. (Gen 9:15)

By emphasizing this crucial passage in Genesis, Maxim aims to demonstrate that those prophesying a second deluge in 1524, such as Bülow, are contradicting the 'testament and indisputable word' given

⁹⁰ Maxim, *Tvoreniiia*, 2, p. 290.

⁹¹ Cited from Thorndike, *A History of Magic*, p. 181. See Maxim, *Tvoreniiia*, 2, pp. 255, 277.

⁹² Ibid., p. 255.

by God to Noah. In other words, they are rejecting Christianity in favour of 'the teachings of the devilish Chaldeans'.⁹³

Interestingly, the second tract by Maxim against the *Almanach* translated by Bülow was written at some point after February 1524, when a second Flood had not inundated the earth.⁹⁴ In a triumphant tone Maxim ridicules his German foe for persisting in his belief that the grand conjunction signified a time of enormous upheaval: 'As this prediction has been rendered false and you are disgraced, you now claim that the divination does not foretell a flood, but changes and alterations of everything existing on the earth.'⁹⁵ However, Maxim is quick to remind Bülow that the *Almanach* 'clearly claims that this must be accomplished by means of water' and that 'other stars must gather in Aries and carry out certain transformations in the universe'.⁹⁶ Hence, in Maxim's eyes the German physician has been unmasked as a false prophet. He sarcastically remarks that Bülow has been 'sunk by his peripatetic syllogisms and cunning words', which have prevented the German from being reconciled with 'what the prophets and apostles said about the mystery of the Most High Trinity'.⁹⁷

The second half of the denunciatory sermon reiterates God's testament to Noah, as uttered in Genesis 9:11 and 9:15. Moreover, Maxim articulates three reasons — in contradistinction to the astrological predictions of a flood — why God decides to inflict punishment on people. Firstly, Maxim states that this occurs when people lead a debauched and unclean life. As examples, he cites the corruption of the earth before the Flood as well as the destruction inflicted on Sodom and Gomorrah because of the sins of its inhabitants. Secondly, God is said to punish dishonesty and recalcitrance, as evident in his treatment of the Egyptians, who ignored all the miracles enacted before their eyes by Moses. Lastly, God is said to punish those who perpetrate crimes against his Commandments. In this instance, the Babylonian captivity of the Israelites is cited as an example of a punishment inflicted on a people, who after prevailing over the Promised Land went on to commit crimes against God's Commandments.⁹⁸

⁹³ Ibid., p. 277.

⁹⁴ The tract is entitled 'Slovo oblichitel'noe, otchasti, protiv latinskago zloveriia: zdes' zhe i protiv "Al'manakha", kotoryi vozvelerechi, chto budet vsemirnyi potop bolee gibel'nyi, chem upominaemyi kogda-libo' ('Denunciatory Sermon, partly against the evil belief of the Latins: here against the "Almanach", which extols that there shall be a universal flood more destructive than ever recorded'). See Maxim, *Tvoreniia*, 2, pp. 276–93.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 278.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 279.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 287.

4. *Conclusion*

Ironically, less than a year after the non-appearance of a great inundation in 1524 it was Maxim the Greek, and not Bülow, who was charged with non-conformism and heresy and tried by a Church Council in Moscow. Subsequently, whereas Maxim was to spend the rest of his life exiled and imprisoned in various monasteries, Bülow remained the chief physician to Vasili III until the latter's death in 1533. Thus, in many ways, Maxim suffered a pyrrhic victory over Bülow. Despite the embarrassment no doubt endured by the German after his predictions were proved false, he could fall back on his medical duties. If carried out to the Grand Prince's liking, Bülow's position as chief physician ensured his protection. Evidently the Orthodox authorities felt more threatened by the great learning of a Greek monk schooled in Italy than from a Catholic physician espousing astrological principles and preaching eschatological changes. Hence, after the Orthodox leadership had weathered the storm whipped up by Bülow prior to February 1524, it would seem that they felt secure enough to jettison their principal weapon of attack. One imagines not even Bülow would have predicted this outcome at the height of his polemic with Maxim between 1521 and 1524.

The intensity of the debate played out between these two highly influential foreign figures at the Muscovite court is indicative of the extent to which the conjunction of 1524 was a major preoccupation among many eminent personages across the whole of Europe. In this regard, Muscovy was no exception. Although the general populace may not have been constructing arks on Moscow's Sparrow Hills, eminent theologians and courtiers were undeniably transfixed by the enormous implications of the ominous predictions extolled by Bülow.

Thus, by studying Maxim's diatribes against astrology, and particularly against Bülow's prediction concerning 1524, one is able to glimpse the collision of two fundamentally differing worldviews vying for pre-eminence. Moreover, one is able to see how religious, philosophical and scientific ideas, which ostensibly emanated from Western Europe, were debated in a Muscovite arena. Both Maxim and Bülow catered to their Russian audience, and in the extant writings of the former the reader can witness the unique fusion of Piconian reasoning, Byzantine theology and Muscovite historical tradition.